

Final Report to the Indian Nations Presbytery

From the Administrative Commission for First Presbyterian Church, Duncan

May 2011

ACTION:

The Administrative Commission for First Presbyterian Church, Duncan, has completed its work and submits the report below to Indian Nations Presbytery. **We request**

(1) that with the receipt of this report, Indian Nations Presbytery dissolve the commission with thanks, and

(2) that Indian Nations Presbytery request the Committee on Ministry to appoint a pastor mentoring group for the present interim and future pastors.

INFORMATION:

The Commission was formed at the request of the session of First Presbyterian Church, Duncan to the Committee on Ministry at a special meeting of Presbytery on May 16, 2008. Commission members Ann Wasson, Moderator, Barbara Hunt, Ronn Allin, Butch Morton, Al Turner, Jim Burns and Edie King were elected and held in prayer at that presbytery meeting. That memory has guided our work and has been much appreciated by us all. When Ronn Allin resigned because he moved out of the presbytery, Mark Henslee was elected by presbytery to take his place.

The Commission was charged with working with the session to restore health to the congregation, to bring about reconciliation within the congregation and to help the session function in healthy ways. We were given authority

In all matters of discipline according to the Rules of Discipline of the Book of Order;

To receive and dismiss members of the congregation;

Over all personnel matters; and

To approve a severance package and dissolve the pastoral relationship.

We have completed this work to the best of our ability.

We met with the session and COM representatives in mid-May 2008 and began our work with a congregation and session deeply divided. Using the Conflict Intensity Scale, we ascertained a conflict between level 4 and 5, "between Fight/Flight and Intractable", 5 being the most intense conflict on the scale. We believe that the current level of conflict to be dramatically diminished to between level 2 and 3, "between Disagreement and Contest".

In May and early June 2008, we met with the session, and set up hearings for the congregation about the severance package for the dissolution of the relationship between John McGarey, the church and the Committee on Ministry on behalf of Indian Nations Presbytery. The final severance package and vote for dissolution was approved by the congregation on June 29, 2008 and duly acted upon by the Committee on Ministry and reported to Presbytery as an action taken on behalf of the presbytery.

That summer, we set up listening sessions with each staff member and with each session member to assess the history of the church and each individual's take on what was the state of the church. Any church member who wished to was also invited to listening sessions in late May and early June 2008.

With COM, we invited Dr. Peter Steinke to work with the congregation as a consultant on conflict resolution.

When Dr. Peter Steinke came in the fall of 2008, he set up listening sessions with leaders and members randomly selected, and held open forum to hear from those who did not get a private appointment. He listened to the story each presented, their feelings and concerns, and assessed their recent history. He came up with 4 areas of concentration for goals and activities toward renewal. The Commission appointed an Action Plan team from among the church members to work with the church leadership on these categories. In light of his observations we made administrative changes in the work of the congregation. Below are listed the four issues and the progress made in each one.

Here is how far we have come.

Viability- A full financial review of the church record in 2009 showed that through the years, the treasurers had been very thorough and careful in administrating the church finances. Even with pledges and giving down, there was enough money to maintain the church programs. The Administrative Commission reviewed staffing and salaries, and with staff changes, recommended a lower overall budget for personnel administration, which helped the budget. At every session meeting, the recently elected treasurer now reports in detail and the financial picture of the church remains strong.

The most recent conflict (2005-08) has had an impact on membership. The Commission has worked with the session, clerk of session and membership secretary to update the active membership roll of the church and to communicate with inactive members. We discovered many who have united with other congregations in the area or have moved away. These latter we have encouraged to unite with a church in their area. As of this writing, there are 141 active members of First Presbyterian Church, Duncan. These more realistic numbers, while lower than former membership, do reflect that a greater percentage of members than previously believed are participating in the work and worship of the church.

This more realistic look at the makeup of the congregation has changed the organization of the leadership of the congregation. In the fall of 2008, the session moderator, Mark Henslee, declared the existing bylaws of the church out of order and the Administrative Commission drafted new, simpler bylaws, reviewed by the session and adopted by the congregation that fall. The session and deacons now number at 6 members each, more in keeping with the size of the congregation. There is no longer a separate board of trustees. Both session and deacons have reorganized to better reflect the current mission of the church. The session has 3 broad workgroups under which committees are being formed: Inside Ministry, Outside Ministry, and Nuts and Bolts. Re-organization continues. The session is functioning in healthier ways.

As noted above, staffing has changed appropriate to a smaller membership congregation. With a full time interim pastor, there is now a part time secretary in the open area of the office, a new part-time musician and the continuing part-time custodian. With a change in positions, there is less pressure on the budget. The session has advertised for a nursery worker. With these changes in staffing, the level of conflict began to diminish.

The Commission has written a simple, easily adapted personnel manual and job descriptions for these positions. The session has recommended members for a personnel committee and these have been appointed and trained for the work. The session will continue to review the volunteer positions that have been part of the fabric of the congregation in recent times and take action as appropriate over time.

Division

By June 2008, the congregation was severely divided. While the presenting issue was the treatment of and leadership style of the pastor, the conflict reflected deep changes in the Duncan community, old hurts unhealed, including serious suspicions of sexual misconduct over the years, as well as misunderstandings and differences among members about leadership and mission. Members withheld money and did not come to worship in protest. The Committee on Ministry had worked with the session to invite Susan Nienaber of the Alban Institute to work with them on conflict resolution. In April 2008, members openly refused to participate in the mission study that was proposed by the session as a result of her work with them. Members were involved in name calling and underhanded gossip. Some members led concerted efforts directed against the pastor who was defended by other members. Session members and other officers had trouble working together. Other members felt silenced and hurt by the level of conflict. Some leaders identified divisions in adult Sunday School classes as the catalyst for the current disputes. The pastor and session were unable to deal with these divisions and asked for an Administrative Commission. One of the first acts of the Commission was to arrange for the dissolution of the pastoral relationship, since all agreed that the relationship was no longer viable. There was disagreement with the terms of severance by some members, but the church weathered the severance time period and remains in good financial shape.

While the Sunday School classes have not discussed their differences with each other in any formal way, the Disciples' class moved into the main church building which has put the whole Sunday School in the same building and saved utility expense for the church. The Disciples' class is developing new shared leadership for its class and is learning to report its offerings and activities to the session and congregation.

During 2009, the Action Plan Team developed some initial goals and activities to address division, leadership and mission. Among the Action Plan Team members there was some very honest discussion which moved their work along.

One comment made early on by commission member, Al Turner, has guided our work with the church. We include the comment in this report for the congregation. He told the story of a church recovering from a deep conflict. The leadership picked a purposeful date and said to all the members, "From this day forward we will not discuss anything that happened before such and such a date." We advised the leaders of the Duncan congregation to pick such a date and to move forward together in a new era of mission and ministry.

After considerable hard work in identifying sources of conflict and letting people be heard, this congregation is moving toward not being defined by its past, and is using its mission study "Appreciative Inquiry" to move toward a "new culture in the church", as one elder noted.

Leadership

Both the leaders and members of the congregation had identified lack of training of church leaders to be a challenge for the church. In February 2009, when Tracy Evans came on board as interim pastor, she took the leadership in preparing an effective and wide-ranging officer training model that the session can adopt and adapt into the future. Four three- hour sessions focused on eight subjects in Presbyterian history, worship and polity have been well received for existing and newly elected officers over the past 2 years.

At session meetings and leadership gatherings, the interim pastor has instituted group building exercises designed to let people get to know one another better, renew relationships and to work together to accomplish tasks. These exercises translate into the elders or deacons really beginning to listen to one another and to re-establish broken trust. The smaller number of session members and deacons has changed the tenor of the meetings. The session now meets in a fellowship square as opposed to a long table which changes the mood from board room to working group. These may seem to be small steps, but we see them beginning to make a big difference in how leadership is learning to work together in this church.

Mission

In the fall of 2010, the session appointed a committee to begin work on “appreciative inquiry”, engaging the congregation in discussion of what members see as their strengths and challenges as a congregation, and what the congregation members see the church doing into the future. In the first part of 2011, the appreciative inquiry committee will develop a mission strategy based on what they learn from members, and what they learn about the current Duncan community. This study once approved by session and the Presbytery’s Committee on Ministry will become the fodder for a pastoral search process. The Administrative Commission has recommended to both the session and the Committee on Ministry that the congregation vote for a designated pastor search later in 2011.

The congregation has stayed engaged in local mission needs with generous gifts and has reached out to Early Head Start. The Commission is very impressed with the thoughtful discussion of the session to make the Cornerstone building available to Early Head Start, a childcare facility with parenting training for young and new parents. This location is ideal since it is near the alternative high school and both mothers and fathers can participate in the program. We have been gratified by the participation of the congregation in providing what was needed to start this program; including the lovely and generous gifts of the quilt hangings. A wonderful group of women and girls gathered all summer to make these quilts; a beautiful sign for the future of the church.

The Commission has met nearly monthly for the past three years, has been represented at every session meeting and has made a report to every stated session meeting; we worked actively with the Action Plan team, the officer training program and the Appreciative Inquiry project. We created a personnel policy manual, trained the new personnel committee and reviewed and cleaned up the membership rolls. The moderator is personally grateful to each and every member for their dedication to this work and their willingness to travel regularly to see to our work. Commission members have expressed their appreciation for the moderator’s leadership at meetings and in communications.

The Commission and interim pastor have worked many hours over the past 3 years to provide insight

and help to the session and other leaders, to review the organization of the church and to offer help, hope and healing. We have benefitted from these new relationships. We believe that the climate in the church has improved, the session is stronger, and the mood is hopeful. We pray that the congregation will continue to worship together, pray for one another, to listen to and be fully present to each other. This will enable them to find the path forward together with their eyes and hearts focused on Jesus Christ and his will and way.

We believe that First Presbyterian Church, Duncan is now able to look forward and to grasp what is vital to their ministry in the name of Jesus Christ. Their work together from this time forward is to embrace a renewed vision for mission and ministry for the Duncan community and out into the world.

This Commission cannot possibly cover or heal every aspect of the church's history of conflicts nor every piece of the most recent conflict. Open discussion, renewed trust, and careful use of members' gifts will need to continue in order to heal feelings that are still unresolved. We pray that we have opened the way to such work in the future.

“Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to do abundantly far more than we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus forever. Amen.” (Ephesians 3: 20-21)

Respectfully submitted for the Commission,

Ann C. Wasson, Moderator